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ABSTRACT

If speech instructors are to teach students to recreate for an audience an author's intellectual and emotional meanings, they must teach them to use human voice effectively. Seven essential elements of effective vocal production that often pose problems for oral interpretation students should be central to any speech training program: (1) relaxation--the muscles involved in voice production must be ready for effective manipulation of vocal quality, volume, pitch, and rate; (2) respiration--breath vibrated between the vocal folds is the basis for voice production, and inefficient breathing habits or inadequate breath control can be partially responsible for almost all voice quality defects; (3) controlled exhalation--the phases of inhalation and exhalation will not be equal in length, and exhalation must be controlled to match the phrases uttered in the speech; (4) breath emission--interpreters must learn to emit the outgoing stream smoothly and evenly, and not in erratic bursts; (5) vibration--control of the vibration of the vocal folds can initiate a softer or harder tone without harsh glotal stops and without damaging and distracting glotalizing; (6) articulation--essential for intelligibility as well as for good oral resonance; and (7) duration--poets choose words for the sounds they contain, and proper sound duration is essential for achieving the intended effect. (HTH)

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EFFECTIVE VOCAL PRODUCTION IN PERFORMANCE

--Robert G. King

INTRODUCTION

Thinking about the place voice and diction occupy in the teaching of Oral Interpretation, I remembered what Dr. Magdalene Kramer told me. "Each semester," she said, "I assign myself a course in Oral Interpretation, and each semester I find myself spending much of my time teaching voice and diction." My own experience in the quarter century since that conversation has confirmed Dr. Kramer's observation.

If we are to teach students to recreate for an audience an author's intellectual and emotional meanings, we must teach those students to use the instrument through which those meanings are conveyed: the human voice.

A thorough understanding of the intellectual content and the form and a profound grasp of the mood and emotional nuances of the work are essential, of course. But ORAL Interpretation differs from other forms of interpretation in that it relies for its effectiveness on the interpreter's transmission skills.

In this brief paper, I propose to discuss seven aspects of effective vocal production in performance. These seven are essential aspects of effective vocal production, and often they pose problems for students in Oral Interpretation. These essentials are: relaxation, respiration, controlled exhalation, breath emission, vibration of the vocal folds, articulation, and duration of sounds.

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RELAXATION

In producing voice, adequate muscle tonus is basic. The muscles involved in voice production must be READY (toned, tuned, tensed--enough--neither too little nor too much) for effective manipulation of vocal quality, volume, pitch, and rate. Too much tension is a common problem, and simply pointing out the problem with the simplistic advice, "Relax!" offers the student little help.

There is not time to review relaxation exercises here, but specific exercises to relax the full body first and then the throat, neck, and jaw areas are a starting place for effective vocal production. Please forgive this self-serving commercial plug, but Eleanor DiMichael provides excellent exercises for this purpose in our book. *

Mrs. DiMichael's daughter Carmel has studied the Alexander Technique and has found it to be useful in relieving stress and in inducing needed relaxation. I have observed her teaching, utilizing these techniques, and the results were impressive. One must be trained to use these techniques, of course.

RESPIRATION

Because breath vibrated between the vocal folds is the basis for voice production, inefficient breathing habits, or inadequate breath control, can be partially responsible for almost all voice quality defects. Efficient respiration, then, is essential to effective vocal production in performance.

We believe the thoracic-abdominal (or central) breathing method best suited to speech needs, and we recommend teaching it to students of Oral Interpretation. Margaret Greene, in her book THE VOICE AND ITS DISORDERS, says:

The paramount importance of correct breathing in speech

* King, Robert G. and DiMichael, Eleanor M. ARTICULATION AND VOICE. New York: Macmillan Co., 1978.

> and song cannot be overestimated. Permanent improvement in the voice cannot possibly be achieved without improvement in respiration.... After relaxation has been established, the first step in teaching is always by far the most difficult; this is the development of the diaphragmatic intercostal method in place of the upper thoracic habit already in existence, and it is very necessary that much attention is spent on this stage before beginning exercises for increase of inspiration and control of expiration.[1]

Central breathing is considered the most efficient because it uses the gross abdominal muscles in exhalation. The breath can be controlled by a strong, steady push by the gross abdominal muscles; there is adequate support for the tone. This skill, then, involves the use of the muscles of the abdominal cavity to exert a controlled muscular pressure in order to support a steady stream of breath between the vocal folds.

CONTROLLED EXHALATION

The key word here is CONTROL. In contrast with breathing for life, which is involuntary and not consciously controlled, breathing for speech IS voluntary and within the control of the speaker.

Unless interrupted by physical exertion or emotional excitement, breathing for life involves a smooth flow of air with phases of inhalation and exhalation about equal in length. Not so with breathing for speech. Though the air flow should be smooth, it will be varied. The phases of inhalation and exhalation will NOT be equal in length.

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1. Margaret Greene, The Voice and Its Disorders, 3rd ed. (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 92.

We speak, of course, on the exhaled breath stream, and we extend the exhalation phase to match the thought groups (or phrases) we utter. Meaningful phrasing is an integral component of Oral Interpretation, and meaningful phrasing depends on controlled exhalation.

The secret of sufficient breath for long phrases is not necessarily to be found in taking extra breath in on inhalation--certainly not in pulling in air in mammoth gasps--but rather in breath control on exhalation. Interpreters must be taught how to attain and maintain good posture, how to tense the abdominal muscles and push from there, and how to avoid hypertension of the thoracic muscles or in the pharyngeal area. One further word: interpreters must also be taught to begin speaking at the peak of inhalation so as to avoid wasting precious breath.

BREATH EMISSION

For effective vocal production, the interpreter needs not only efficient central breathing and control of exhalation; the interpreter also must have a free-flowing emission of breath out of the larynx into the specific resonating cavity and then out of the mouth.

Interpreters must learn to emit the outgoing air stream smoothly, evenly, and freely. The air should not gush out or come out in erratic bursts. Nor should the air be caught and held back in the pharyngeal area. The air should come steadily forward--up and out, through an open, relaxed oral cavity marked by unclenched teeth and unlocked jaw!

One other word about emission: Nasals offer a special challenge and a special opportunity. The three nasal consonants of English, with nasal resonance and emission, must HUM. Properly emitted, they make their musical contribution to oral interpretation.

VIBRATION

Phonation involves the emission of breath between the vocal folds, breath that is then set into vibration by the movement of the folds. An interpreter can control the vibratory process--somewhat. One can learn to increase or decrease muscle tension in the laryngeal and pharyngeal areas. And one can learn to initiate a softer or a harder attack. Tone should be initiated without harsh glottal stops and sustained without damaging and distracting glottalizing.

The goal is smooth, not spastic, vibration--with the vocal folds vibrating evenly without strain.

ARTICULATION

Interpreters, like other speakers, must master correctly placed articulation. Not only is articulation essential for intelligibility, it is basic to good oral resonance. Resonance, as you know, varies with the overtones (formants) produced, and these overtones are changed by shifting articulators' placement--particularly the tongue. Retraction of the tongue is to be avoided.

Interpreters also need to be reminded that many sounds are produced more clearly when the lips are opened, the lower jaw is relaxed, and the back teeth are unclenched. These modifications of the oral cavity affect the overtones, and hence oral resonance.

Eleanor DiMichael and I are convinced, based on years of teaching experience, that a sound program of articulation improvement provides a good basis for voice improvement. Noticeable changes take place in the sound of a student's voice when she or he learns to produce sounds clearly and precisely. For that reason, we begin a program of speech improve-

ment with articulation. Teachers of Oral Interpretation, the attention you give to improving student's articulation will contribute significantly to improving those student's voices in performance.

A word about the relationship of articulation to resonance: The shape and size of a resonator, the size of its opening to the outer air, and the surface texture of the resonator are all factors that influence the amount and kind of resonance produced. Generally speaking, the larger the resonating cavity, the more the lower formants (overtones) will be reinforced and the larger the opening of the resonating cavity to the outer air, the more the higher formants will be reinforced (or amplified). Resonance, then, can be modified by manipulating the oral and pharangeal cavities and the lips. Unclenching the back teeth and relaxing the lower jaw enlarges the resonating cavity--amplifying the lower overtones, and opening and moving the lips increases the size of the outer opening--amplifying the higher overtones. The result is a more mellow, more vibrant, and fuller voice.

DURATION

An aspect of vocal production related to both resonance and rate is DURATION of sounds. I find that time spent working with Oral Interpretation students on duration of sounds is time well invested.

Poets choose words for the sounds they contain, and proper duration is essential for achieving the intended effect. Students must be made conscious of the variation in the lengths of English sounds. They must be made aware of the differences between /i/ and /ɪ/ and between /u/ and /ʊ/, for example--not just the differences in formants that distinguish one from the other, but also in the distinctive duration

differences as well. They must recognize that sounds such as /eɪ/ and /oʊ/ naturally occupy a longer space of time than some other sounds such as /ɛ/ and /ɔ/.

Telling students to "slow down" is of no help at all. Working on the duration of pauses is of some help. But attention to the proper length of sounds makes a remarkable difference--both in voice quality and in rate. Giving the three nasal consonants the two beats they deserve adds sonority and musicality, as does giving two beats to final / l / and / z/. An added benefit, of course, is reduced rate and increased intelligibility.

CONCLUSION

If students of Oral Interpretation are to have effective vocal production in performance, they must master the seven essentials I have discussed with you today--adequate relaxation, efficient respiration, controlled exhalation, free-flowing breath emission, smooth and unstrained vibration of the vocal folds, correctly placed articulation, and proper duration of sounds.